carry me home

By: rumiberri

At some point, she realized that she had become a living coffin; a container that carried whispers of regrets inside her, hoping to one day bury the ghosts she had met along the way. [AU][No Magic][World has ended, but who will pick up the pieces]

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Methodical. Careful.

Slow.

Back hunched as she snips at the fabric, metal blades snagging each time they're pressed closed.

Dull scissors lead to jagged lines.

And jagged lines lead to uneven strips.

Regret, stained the same colour as the wound on her arm, seeps through; if she had done this earlier, she would've been all patched up by now.

She ignores that feeling, just like how she ignores how movement sends little twinges of pain down her arm.

She continues cutting.

Thin strips, enough to layer, enough to ration, enough to last her a few days.

A deconstruction of the t-shirt in her hands, until all that's left is a pile of white pieces of fabric at her feet.

The scissors are set aside, and the small first aid kit nearby is lifted. She tilts it upside down, and out spills two bottles of rubbing alcohol, a box of band aids that she knows is half empty, and a few packets of stale crackers found a while back.

She grabs the alcohol, and eyes the amount: less than half in this bottle, less than a quarter in the other.

A sigh.

She needs supplies soon, and hopes that she'll be able to get them without complications.

A small twist of her lips; there's a high chance that things won't be easy.

She shakes her head, and turns her attention back to her arm that's slowly bleeding out.

A quick mop up of whatever blood that has already spilled, before she tosses that piece of cloth away. A tip of the bottle against another clean piece of fabric, prompting the sharp smell of disinfectant to tickle her nose.

A deep breath, before she holds it against her gash. She winces as the cool liquid touches the open wound, her teeth gritting to keep from crying out.

It's important to disinfect, a voice reminds her. Even little cuts can turn deadly if not treated properly.

Every little bit of caution counts.

Reluctantly, the alcohol soaked cloth is dragged against her arm. She stomps her foot into the ground, eyes now scrunched closed from the pain. A few more swipes, before she pulls her hand away. She swallows her whimper, instead leaning her face close to the wound. A warm breath seems to ease the burn, and she continues blowing on it until the pain subsides to a level that's more tolerable.

Another piece of fabric thrown to the side, and finally, she prepares the cleanest piece as a dressing.

With a bit of maneuvering and use of her teeth, she manages to bandage her arm in no time.

She flexes tentatively, moving around to test ease of movement and comfort.

Maybe a bit too tight.

But that's okay—the bleeding needs to stop first.

She'll take a quick lunch break, have a short nap, and after another change of her bandages, she'll once again be on her way.

She turns around, this time grabbing the large backpack behind her. A small grunt as she lifts it closer to place it into her lap.

An unbuckle of the flap located at the top. A bottle of water, and a small satchel filled with dried fruits are pulled out.

A check to her watch: 12:13pm.

She nods, absently noting the time in her mind.

The backpack is returned behind her. She settles against it, making herself comfortable as the discoloured sky above keeps her company.

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A slow trot down the hillside, her kicking up dry dust with every step.

There's a few harrowing moments where she almost slips, but luckily, she manages to dig in her heels and avoid what would've been a very painful tumble through the rock covered terrain.

Once she almost reaches the bottom, she clears the remaining distance with a small jump. For a moment, it's just the feeling of freedom surrounding her.

A few seconds of weightlessness, before she lands with a hard clomp onto solid ground.

She regrets it ever so briefly as pins and needles in her feet form from impact.

She shakes her legs, and waits until it disappears.

Her calloused fingers then slip through her jacket pocket, and she pulls out a simple compass. The arrow spins, realigning until it finally reads 'N'.

She doesn't really have a destination, only a handful of objectives.

Some, more important than others.

A look at her surroundings: empty, and dry.

The compass disappears back into her pocket.

After re-evaluating her bandages, she decides she has at least another hour until they need to be changed.

And maybe two hours until the sun sets.

A small puff of breath exhaled.

She needs to find shelter.

But, considering the line of buildings visible in the distance, that shouldn't be hard.

A chug of water, before she continues on her way down the abandoned road, a set of boot prints left in her wake.

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The thing about buildings, is that they both provided shelter, as well as cover.

She's not naive; she's survived this far for a reason, and the innocent little girl she used to be has already been shed, a long, long time ago.

Closer to the city, and the gun usually strapped to her side is now in her right hand, safety off, cartridge loaded.

12 shots for this one, and the other gun tied to her leg has 8; but those bullets are much, much more powerful, and she doesn't want to waste those if she can help it.

She's in clear view of whoever may be hiding, and her eyes narrow behind her broken glasses.

It's one of her fears that one day, she's going to lose her glasses altogether.

Thoughts on trying to find an optometry flutter in her mind—but there's movement in the corner, and she dashes forward as shots ring out.

There's the smell of gunpowder, the sound as metal ricochets, and the pops that reverberates through the empty area.

A zigzag pattern in her running, and she finally dives behind a corner, plaster and paint flying as gunshots follow.

A rush of adrenaline sets her heart thumping as her lungs rapidly rise and fall. She already knows that whoever is after her, is playing for keeps.

Judging by the amount of gunfire, it has to be a single opponent.

Or—

She ducks as she hears another gunshot.

A quick confirmation of another shooter, and she runs down the alleyway, feet stomping loudly as her backpack bounces against her back.

Two.

There are two of them.

A rare sight—but not unheard of.

It doesn't matter.

Her mouth twists into a humourless grin.

They fired first.

And self-defense, is the best defense; the best reason to retaliate.

She darts to the left, side-stepping more bullets even as she reaches for the pocket hidden in the underside of her jacket.

Still moving, she pulls out a custom made pipe bomb.

It's been awhile, but she doesn't mind letting the world burn down around her.

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All that running, and she's sweating under those baggy clothes of hers.

She wipes her forehead with a handkerchief, dabbing at the sides of her face once that's done.

Back into her pocket, before she reaches for a bottle of water.

She chugs that all down, and the tepid water soothes her dry throat.

The empty bottle is tossed, a hollow sound as it bounces once, and then rolls onto the street.

The back of her hand against her mouth as she swipes away a few droplets of water sticking to her lips.

A small sigh, and finally, she turns to regard her attackers.

One is unconscious; a very unfortunate accident where a piece of debris had caught the corner of his head.

There's a large puddle of blood growing underneath him, and she knows that head injuries always bleed out more.

But—

She doesn't know if he'll be able to survive.

His companion, a female, is screaming at her, which she has been ignoring for a while now.

Her leg is obviously broken—twisted at her side with a sliver of white bone peeking out through red skin and flesh.

Maybe it had been her fault, but her eyes have no sympathy in them as she stares her down.

It was either her, or them, and like everyone else in this world, everyone is only in it for themselves.

She disregards the woman who is now crying, and instead approaches the unconscious man.

A quick rifle through his belongings: some ammunition for his handgun already in her possession, a few rolled up notes, and a faded picture in his shirt pocket.

She stares at it for a moment. This is what the man would look like if half his face wasn't caved in. The woman in the photo is not the same as the woman on the floor, and the child in the middle is missing.

She slips the photo back into his pocket.

She turns, and the woman is now sobbing.

She knows why.

Injuries are hard to treat, and she's definitely not a doctor.

The bone has to be set, the wound needs to be sutured. Constantly disinfected.

She's no longer able to walk.

A liability.

A sitting duck.

She approaches slowly, kneeling once she's close enough. She stares at that broken leg.

A glance to that crying face, and she closes her eyes.

"...Do you have any last words?" Her voice is soft, but she knows the woman has heard her.

A bloody hand reaches out, fingers smearing dark stains onto her camo pants.

Her eyes open.

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She bites down, teeth gnashing together as they work to tear the stick of jerky in half.

It's dry and stringy, but there's plenty of it. A full jar.

Part of their stash she had found after searching through the buildings.

There's a fuel can propped up against one of the walls, and she stares at it as she eats. She's not really looking though.

It takes her a moment, until she notices the waning sunlight from the windows stretching the shadows across the floorboards. She glances to outside; sunset.

Another mouthful of water to wash down the last bite, and another lick of her fingers before she sighs in content.

It's maybe the first bit of meat she has had in a while, and for once her stomach isn't gurgling with hunger after her meal.

She leans back against her hands, legs in front of her. She moves her boots, clapping them together and listening as they make soft thuds each time they connect.

The scavengers will appear once it's night, but she's not worried about those.

This was their safe haven, and judging by the amount of supplies gathered, they had been here for a while.

She briefly wonders how many other survivors they had encountered, but doesn't dwell on it for too long.

A slow sigh.

She'll need to secure the perimeter, and then she'll get some sleep.

A look to her bandages.

After she changes those, first.

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When she walks out mid morning, the streets are bare.

There's only a crimson stain on the floor, and she takes a moment to marvel at their efficiency.

The dirt will gather, and when rain clouds roll around, even that puddle will slowly disappear.

The only things that remain of those two are the photographs slipped into her side bag, and a small locket resting besides them.

The woman had whispered words she didn't understand. Judging by the accent and her facial features, maybe some kind of European language.

Gestures were universal though, and she had understood once bloodied fingers had pulled at the locket around her neck.

'Find her', she seemed to say. 'Find her, and tell her I'm sorry.'

It's what everyone seemed to say at least.

She tenses as she hears something off to the side.

Her hand hovers at her leg immediately, and she turns towards the source.

She freezes as large red eyes stare at her.

It tilts its head, as if questioning her existence.

She bares her teeth, and in one fluid motion, the gun is out of its holster and into her hands.

Those red eyes narrow, and she fires.

It leaps, and without another glance at her, it runs away.

She watches it closely, watching as it bounds across the roads, before veering off and clearing a large brick wall to her left with a giant leap.

Her eyes glance around warily, in case there's another one near by.

She remains there for a few more minutes, hands hovering on the trigger, body on full alert.

Finally, she relaxes ever so slightly, and the twinge on her arm informs her that her movements have caused her injury to bleed again.

She shakes her head.

She hates those things.

One day, if she finds enough firepower, she's going to try and torch as many as she can.

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Sometimes, the days tend to blend together.

With only the sun bearing down on her back, and dry dust sticking to her throat, the only sounds she can hear are her own footsteps, and the slow inhale and exhale of her breaths.

Sometimes, she glances to her side, and wishes that there was someone there besides her.

Isolation, and her thoughts cycling in her head are never good company.

Sometimes, she thinks back, to however long ago, when she met that old man in that abandoned factory.

American, but they were able to communicate with his choppy Japanese, gestures, and the few words of English she remembered.

A war veteran, who had seen so many things in his life.

A man with high morals who had saved her from those with less.

He had taught her proper gun technique. How to survive.

The second one to show her kindness in this ruined world.

But he was old, and even before she had met him, disease had already claimed his body. Without proper medication, his time was almost up.

But he had told her, that he had been lucky to end his life not alone.

She had buried him out front, right where the sun hits in the morning. There was no way she was going to the let the scavengers take him.

Not like—

There's a letter in her bag in his handwriting, and sometimes she pulls it out when the days get a bit too long.

She can't read most of it, but she's slowly learning the words here and there.

She knows what it is though.

It's a love letter, addressed to his deceased wife.

It had been his wish to be buried next to her, and all his feelings are wrapped up in ink and paper.

She's not sure if she'll ever reach wherever her grave is, considering how dispersed the continents are.

But, it's another promise she's keeping.

Another dying wish she hopes to fulfill.

Just like—

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A scattered rain shower, and she's waiting it out underneath a large oak tree. Occasional droplets are hitting her as they pass through the dying leaves.

It's a welcome sight though; the further she travels, the hotter it gets. The rain should at least clear that murky haze that has been hovering in the sky for weeks.

She takes a seat, back braced against the tree trunk as her eyes stare above.

The soft drip as the rain falls.

The pitter patter as water sprinkles into dirt.

The gentle, hushed whispers as it washes everything away.

Without her knowing, it lulls her to sleep.

When she wakes, all that remains are a few clouds that hang overhead.

An orange sky, and a breath of fresh air.

She breathes out slowly, hands in her lap as her eyes once again close.

Rain is fleeting, just like everything else.

She knows that if not tomorrow, then the next day will once again burn her throat and weigh down her shoulders.

She tilts her head back, feeling the solid press of the tree against her.

Another slow exhale.

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It's rare to run into a group of survivors, and mostly it means bad news and big trouble.

Luckily for her, they're loud and she spots them long before they spot her.

Five males, maybe late teens, early 20's.

Guns in the hands of four, one even with a sub-machine gun.

The chances of that being loaded are low though. Ammunition for those ran out the fastest, especially with how trigger happy and inexperienced their owners usually are.

He had taught her that.

She shakes her head.

She has a choice now.

To empty her gun, or to walk away.

But—

It doesn't matter.

The choice is no longer hers.

It's rare to see groups, because large bunches of people attracted scavengers, even in daylight.

She doesn't know how they had survived for so long, but as she hears their screams and the shots of gun fire, she thinks it has to be luck.

She could help them, but more scavengers arrive, and she knows better than to get caught in the crossfire.

A glance over, to make sure she isn't being followed, before she cuts across the area.

More screams behind her, but she doesn't spare them another look. She can't afford to.

If she felt sorry for every person killed, she'd be in their position, soon enough.

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She sits on the roof of a building, legs dangling over the edge.

Before, a glance down would send her straight into vertigo, but like many of her other fears, they're already forgotten, and easily pushed into the back of her mind.

The sun is setting in the distance, and she has a clear view of all the broken streets below.

She's munching on crackers, crumbs dropping and disappearing as soon as they fall.

Only shelter found here. No survivors, no supplies.

And thankfully, no scavengers.

They've been appearing the more she travels in this direction, and she wonders if there's a reason.

She remembers learning in school, that animals tend to flock where there is more food.

Maybe, there are more survivors over there.

She doesn't know whether or not it's a good thing, but...

It doesn't mean it'll stop her from continuing on her way.

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It's a strange feeling when she meets someone previously only known to her by a small piece of paper.

Stranger, even, when said person is already deceased.

Violence in this world is not surprising, but this is the first time she has run into someone she has been looking for.

A tentative touch of her hand against their cheek. A small exhale when they're not as cold, or as stiff as she thought they would be.

Maybe, if she had been a bit quicker, she could've saved them.

She lowers herself onto the floor, careful to avoid the blood. She doesn't worry that the killers will come back; scavengers loved dead bodies, and it's better not to linger around one for too long.

She digs through her side bag, and pulls out a small stack of papers bundled together with frayed strings.

It takes a moment, until she finds the one she wants.

A flip of the photo, and she reads the words scribbled on the back aloud.

"*Jeanne Williams*," her accent heavy as the foreign words pass through her lips.

She switches back to her home language.

"Your father loves you, and regrets he never had the chance to walk you down the aisle."

She stares at their empty eyes. She reaches over, hands brushing their eyelids close.

If she didn't know any better, they look like they're sleeping.

She knows better.

She's not sure what to do now, but she knows she needs to leave soon.

She glances down to the photo once more.

It wouldn't be fair to leave her to the scavengers.

She slips the photo into almost unyielding fingers, before one of her many bombs is gently placed onto the ground.

"...Rest in peace."

She pushes down on the button, and there's the beep as the timer slowly counts off.

She stands, already walking away without another glance.

60 seconds, and she has enough time to find shelter as the area explodes.

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She's resting, hiding behind a few broken barrels. There's a bottle of water in her hands, and just as she brings it up for a sip, she hears something in the distance.

The lid is quickly twisted on, before she grabs her gun.

She moves slowly, quiet as she sits up to look beyond her cover.

It doesn't take long to figure out what had made those noises.

There's a girl, maybe her age, in the middle of the street.

One scavenger in front of her, another to her side.

And no doubt more to be coming after.

For them to be so unabashedly hunting in broad daylight, it meant that after they attacked this girl, they would go after her.

That's okay.

She's gotten a bit tired of running lately, and she has plenty of supplies after a really good haul a few days back.

She waits, until she sees one of them moving in for the kill.

It's best to attack when they're distracted, and there's two bullets through its head before anyone can react.

The girl screams, landing on the floor as the scavenger collapses almost right in front of her.

She ignores her, and instead darts out from behind the barrels, guns blazing.

She doesn't worry that she might accidentally hit her; that girl is paralyzed with fear.

The second scavenger turns to her, and she feigns a dart to the left.

It moves, she moves, and another two bullets sends that one to the floor.

Another scream, and she looks up as the girl points to something from behind.

She pivots on her foot and whirls around. Her guns are already poised to fire. The trigger is pulled, bullets moving in for the kill.

One more dead, but the second scavenger manages to dodge a deadly shot, turning it into a mere graze.

"T-There's shelter nearby! W-We need to move before more come!"

Strange to hear her native language spoken after so long, but she doesn't need to be told twice.

The loaded gun strapped to her leg is grasped, and she easily switches it out with her empty one.

"Lead the way," she replies, even as she keeps her eyes on the growling scavenger.

It leaps forward, and the barrel of her gun follows its movements as it tries to throw her off.

She's fairly good at picturing after images, and it's a mere predication of its next step.

Bullet tears through white flesh, though she has never actually seen them bleed.

She quickly turns to the other girl who she's relieved to find is waiting for her.

The girl gestures her over, and she quickly makes a beeline for her pack, grabbing the water bottle she had left behind as well, before she catches up.

She's lead through empty streets, until they turn into an alley that leads to a dead end.

Just as she's about to protest, another voice shouts out.

"Madoka! Over here!"

She glances up, and there's another girl their age waving her arms from a fire escape.

The sound of metal grinding, and she watches as a ladder is slowly lowered.

The ladder stops and a curse shouted is the only explanation.

She spins around, guns ready, and there's three more scavengers approaching.

"S-Sayaka-chan! Hurry!"

She ignores them.

7 bullets left.

These were stronger though.

If she's really, really lucky, she could kill all three with one shot.

Her lips tug up, and her backpack is dropped to the ground.

"Madoka! Hurry! Just leave her!"

"W-What! S-Sayaka-chan!"

The voices agitates the scavengers, and as one, they move as a pack and rush forward.

She meets them head on.

Close enough, and she pushes off on her right foot, using her speed to leap to the side as one of them tries to bite her on the shoulder.

She twists her body away to dodge another attack. She's still moving though, and she lets her right foot slide in front, before she turns back to face them.

It's only two of three lined up, but she can't be picky. She fires.

She doesn't wait for the inevitable hit, and instead aims at the remaining scavenger that's bounding towards the ladder.

Just as it's about to grab the girl's leg with those sharp teeth, a bullet sends it straight to the floor.

"Hurry up! There's only going to be more!" the girl up above is calling to her.

She nods, and hurriedly moves to join them, retrieving her pack along the way.

As soon as she's standing besides them, she helps them pull the ladder up as more appear.

A sigh of relief heard is her exact response.

She debates whether or not to waste more bullets, but there's a shaky hand on her wrist.

She looks up, and pink eyes, filled with fear, and maybe something else, stare at her.

A tentative smile. "T-They can't reach up here for some reason. I-If you leave them alone, they'll leave after a while..."

She nods. The safety is once more clicked on, and she ignores the pair of wary eyes watching her as she slips the gun back into its pocket.

"L-Let's get back inside."

She nods, and she's the one bringing up the rear as the taller of the two leads the way.

She knows they don't trust her, and the one in front keeps glancing behind.

Maybe to make sure she's not going to put a bullet through their backs.

She ignores it, instead evaluating their appearances.

The one she had saved, is shorter than her. Pink hair, tied into puffy pigtails with red ribbons. A set of oversized clothes on her body, large jacket with rolled sleeves, pants with rolled cuffs. Boots.

Familiar.

She turns her attention to her companion, and immediately notices the way one leg seems to be dragging as she walks.

Any sign of injuries are hidden underneath an equally large set of pants. And judging by the condition of her t-shirt, they have been wearing these clothes for a while.

Those suspicious blue eyes that match her hair turn her way. "We're almost there," she says, before she turns around again.

Silence, broken only by the taps as their footsteps hit the metal surface.

They enter an open window, and she's the last one crawling through.

As soon as her boots lower to the wooden floor, there's a metal bat shoved under her nose.

"L-Listen alright," the taller one, she can tell she's trying her best to stay strong, "I really appreciate you saving Madoka. But if you try anything, I won't think twice about smashing this on your head."

"S-Sayaka-chan..."

When she sees those blue eyes glance away, her hand quickly moves. In one fluid motion, she disarms the taller girl, and they both stare at her as she now has the bat resting against her shoulder.

"...If I wanted to kill you, I would've done so earlier," she says, watching as they both move back.

She holds out the bat, and gestures for the taller one to take it.

A nervous gulp, before a shaky hand wraps around the grip. A tentative tug, and that bat is once again in her possession.

She sighs, and takes a look around.

A large room, with spare furniture pushed up against one of the walls.

A bundle of materials in a corner—water bottles, and blankets.

The stale taste of air.

She glances over as she sees the smaller girl approach.

A hand is held out.

A Western styled greeting.

"I-I'm K-K-Kaname Madoka... T-Thank you, for saving me earlier." A nervous smile. "Uhm." She gestures to her side. "T-This is my friend, Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka stares back, and she doesn't reply.

"I-It's nice, to meet someone who's also Japanese...? U-Uhm. It's... t-that is... c-can I ask your name...?"

Her eyes flicker over, and Madoka flinches.

"T-That is... i-if it's alright! With you!" Her voice turns into a squeak at the end.

She slowly exhales. "...Akemi Homura."

The nervous smile widens. "A-Akemi-san." Madoka bows low. "T-Thank you, for saving me. I-It's... I can't repay you, but—"

"...You are Kaname Madoka?"

"Uhm." Madoka nods. "Y-Yes. Y-You can call me Ma—"

"Kaname Madoka..." she repeats.

"Y-Yes...?"

She reaches down, and unzips the small bag at her side. "Kaname Madoka..."

"Uhm...? A-Akemi-san?"

It takes a moment, until she finally finds what she was searching for.

And when her lavender eyes lift, Madoka steps back in fear as she sees her hand move.

Sayaka is already moving to intercept, but that hand is empty of any weapons.

There's only a small object now sitting on the top of her palm.

"Kaname Madoka."

Madoka looks at her face, and then down to her outstretched hand.

An encouraging nod, and she steps forward.

Trembling fingers are brought up, and though Madoka's hesitant, she grabs what's offered.

It's dark enough inside that she needs to bring it closer to her eyes to examine it. She vaguely notices as Sayaka joins her side, brimming with obvious curiosity.

Madoka turns the small object around in her fingers, and she finally recognizes it to be a hair clip in the shape of a small bow.

Her brow furrows as her lips part.

It's familiar, but—

"Kaname Junko. She was your mother...?"

"Y—Yes, but how—"

A sharp intake of breath from Sayaka. Madoka feels the temperature in the room drop as a chill prickles down her spine.

Her eyes widen, before they stare into lavender that's still watching her.

"W-Where did you get this...?" Madoka whispers. Her hands are shaking, and she barely feels anything as Sayaka wraps her arm

around her shoulders. "Where—Where did you get this?!" she demands, voice now raised.

Those eyes cast down—and Madoka doesn't even realize she's moving.

It doesn't feel like it's real—but there's someone controlling her as she grasps at fabric angrily, hands twisting, fingers trying to claw at *something*.

A sound echoing in her ears—a deep, painful sound coming from her own throat.

"Madoka! Stop it! Madoka!"

Tears are blurring her vision, and there's something suffocating her chest.

"Madoka!"

She struggles as arms wraps around her waist.

An elbow thrown, and she hears a grunt of pain.

"No! No! NO! NO! NO!"

"Madoka!"

There's something wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her side.

"NO! L-Let me go! W-Why! H-How—" she chokes back a sob.

"Madoka, stop it. Stop it, Madoka."

"N-No," she whispers. "No... Mama... M-Mama can't—"

She stops struggling, and her legs buckle underneath her.

"M-Mama—"

Something catches in her throat—before a loud wail escapes.

Sayaka gathers Madoka in her arms, holding her close as she buries her face into Sayaka's chest. Her small hands grip her desperately.

Sayaka hugs her tightly. "I'm sorry, Madoka. I'm so sorry..."

Homura's still standing by the window.

She turns away.

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Further investigation in the structure, and the fire escape outside also connects to the roof.

She stays there for the night instead.

The last she had seen of them, sobs had turned quiet, and blue eyes had made it clear she shouldn't be there.

She had left.

She sits now on the ledge, legs dangling beneath her.

Day had set into night, and there's a full moon hanging in the sky.

No night pollution, and it's a bright illumination to the area down below.

Reflections of red shining in the distance, with occasional gleams that appear to glance her way.

A few curious ones watch her, but eventually they leave, on the search for easier prey.

She leans forward slightly.

The area is filled with scavengers.

She wonders how anyone can survive here.

A soft clang, as shoes hit the metal rungs of the ladder.

She turns, waiting until a head of blue pokes out.

She turns away, and continues staring at nothing.

Uneven footsteps, as one foot drags more than the other.

That's right—she's injured.

She waits, and eventually the other girl—Sayaka—is to her side.

Enough distance left between, that she'd need to stretch her arm out in order to touch her.

They're both quiet, only the sounds of rummaging and scratching as things prowl the night.

Sayaka clears her throat. "...She's... she's sleeping, in case you're wondering. She hasn't... been able to sleep lately, but I guess crying exhausted her."

She doesn't respond.

"...I need to go back soon, in case she wakes up."

Her eyes continue to follow movements down below.

A hand roughly grabs her, and she knows a good, strong push, can send her over the edge.

It doesn't bother her at all.

"Listen, alright. I-I need to know, for Madoka's sake. J-Junko-san... Madoka's Mama... was... w-were you the one...?"

She closes her eyes.

She can feel that hand on her tense, before the pressure is suddenly gone.

"..You can stay here, for tonight. As thanks, for saving Madoka. But you better be out of here, as soon as the sun rises."

She still doesn't reply.

She hears it, those uneven footsteps as they slowly start walking away.

The soft clangs, as shoes hit metal.

And once more, she's left alone.

She bows her head.

\\

It's another sleepless night, but it happens enough that she's used to it by now.

A quick meal, and she's stretching out her body, preparing for the long day, when there's sounds by the ladder once more.

She turns, expecting blue, and instead finds a head of unkempt pink.

This time, she doesn't turn away.

She watches as the smaller girl approaches.

Movements lethargic, and slightly worrying at how unsteady she seems on her feet.

But she clears the distance, and soon, they're staring at one another.

Pink eyes flicker around, before they land on lavender.

"...How?" Madoka croaks out.

Silence.

"...How?" she repeats more forcefully. "Y-You..."

Homura sees tears gathering in those expressive eyes once more.

"You owe me an explanation," Madoka whispers. "H-How did... h-how did Mama...?"

Those tears fall freely, and she has the strangest urge to reach over and wipe them away.

She doesn't.

She nods slowly. "...Alright."

She walks towards the ledge, leaning against it once she's close enough.

Madoka follows her, and unlike Sayaka, who had remained further away, if she lifts her hand, it will brush against hers.

Their close proximity has her swallowing heavily.

She ignores it, and instead casts her eyes to the sky as she remembers.

"...I was originally from Tokyo," she explains softly. "After the displacements began... e-everything was in utter chaos." She glances over, and those pink eyes are watching her closely. She looks away. "The area I was sent to, was close to a port... Luckily for us, there were enough buildings intact, enough shelter that we could all stay there comfortably. Food and water were minimal, but it was... things were still okay, for a while."

She breathes out slowly.

"J-Junko-san... Junko-san... despite... s-she..."

A flash of red in her mind.

Her voice trails off, and it takes her a moment until she realizes she's shaking.

There's a hand on her wrist, and she turns, expecting harsh and judgmental eyes on her, instead finding kindness. Sympathy.

The same gaze that Junko had offered.

Something cracks inside her.

She hasn't had to think about this in so long, that there's a sudden pain in her chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as she bows her head. "It—it was my fault. I-If I hadn't tripped—s-she wouldn't have—it—"

Her face is in her hands, and she can just picture that day clearly in her mind.

"I-It should've been me. If-If I hadn't been for me—I sh-should have died instead—"

She stiffens when she feels an arm around her. She lifts her head just as something warm presses against her.

The feeling is so foreign, that she doesn't realize that she's being hugged until there's pink in her vision.

"...I'm sorry," Madoka whispers into her ear.

Her breath hitches. "W-Why are y—"

"...It's okay. You've... had to carry this guilt for so long." Arms tighten around her. "You've... held everything in for so long. I-It's okay."

The pain is still there, but she suddenly has a word for it.

Those sleepless nights—that empty feeling that drives her forward.

Guilt, for having someone's life exchanged for her own.

Her hands lift, and she grips loose fabric in her fingers.

"I-I'm sorry," she sobs out. "I'm s-sorry. I'm s-sorry, that it wasn't me. T-That—"

"Shhh." A hand stroking her head. "I-It's okay. It's okay."

/

They're both sitting on the floor, back against the ledge, leaning against each other for support.

Shared tears shed for the woman that had made an impact on their lives.

The sun hangs higher in the sky now, and she knows that she should be prepping for her departure.

Instead, she's next to this kind stranger.

She hears the soft clang from the ladder, and raises her head to look over.

A face full of surprise once Sayaka has a clear view of them. She opens her mouth, but Homura lifts a finger to her lips.

A point towards the smaller girl, who's now asleep.

Sayaka merely limps towards them. She takes a seat next to Madoka, and Homura watches as she closes her eyes.

She shifts, but smaller hands are gripping her sleeve.

A short nap sounds really good about now.

A brief moment, when she tries to convince herself to move.

But whispers of the sandman are louder, and her eyes slowly close.

Her body relaxes, and she slowly tips to the side.

It's just the three of them, on that lonely roof.

Resting, while the world passes them by.

\\

When she wakes, she finds her glasses perched crookedly on her face.

She reaches up fix them, but her elbow knocks into something.

She blinks, and turns her head. Her eyes are still dusted with sleep as she stares into pink eyes that stare back.

The warmth against her side is unfamiliar, and it takes a moment, until she finally reacts.

She jumps away.

She's mildly panicking, but she hears laughter, and stops.

"You should've seen your face!" Sayaka teases, laughing as she holds her stomach.

She blinks.

Another soft laugh joins in, and she glances over only to see Madoka laughing into her hand.

"It was pretty funny, Homura-chan," Madoka admits.

The informal use of her name has her staring.

A pause, and Madoka's eyes widen as she realizes what she has said.

"S-Sorry! Akemi-san! Uhm..."

She shakes her head. "N-No... H-Homura... is fine..."

Madoka gives her a small smile. "You can call me Madoka, as well, Homura-chan."

Not to be left out, Sayaka leans forward. "Sayaka is fine."

Homura nods slowly.

Madoka gently pats the spot next to her.

A glance, before she tentatively retakes her seat, though she doesn't sit as close as before.

Madoka curls in her legs, resting her chin on her knees.

All humour is wiped from her face, and that melancholic smile once again appears.

Homura opens her mouth, but there's the sudden sound of a stomach growling.

She sees Madoka shift, and there's a blush on her cheeks.

"Uhm..." Madoka gives her a timid smile. "S-Sorry..."

Homura leans back against the wall. She doesn't even really need to think about it.

She stands, and they watch as she walks over to that large backpack sitting off to the side.

As she carries it over, they can hear things inside jangle around.

Close enough, and she settles down in front of them.

She doesn't remember seeing any food in their room.

She digs through her pack, and it isn't long until she's pulling out cans, and bottles of water.

Her small pouch filled with the last strips of beef jerky is brought out as well.

"Here," she tells them, pushing it towards the two that have dropped into silence.

She can see the hunger in their eyes; how long has it been since they've last eaten?

Considering Sayaka's injury, and Madoka's actions yesterday, the other girl had most likely left their safe haven to search for food.

Desperation is the only explanation as to why she would risk being attacked by scavengers.

She can tell they want to accept—but their pride seems to be holding them back.

"I can get more," she assures them.

They glance to each other nervously.

There's another growl of hunger with the aspect of food.

Sayaka bites down, and she's the first to reach for one of the cans.

She stares at the label—fruit cocktail.

The lid is popped off, and the sweet smell has her mouth watering.

She looks to Madoka, who hesitantly brings her hand to grab another can.

Sliced pineapples.

Homura offers them utensils.

A tentative first bite, before they tear into the cans with a sense of abandonment.

She has to stop them from eating too much, too quickly; it would serve no one to have them waste supplies if they made themselves sick.

Once they have eaten their fill, she turns to them curiously.

"How long have you two been here?" she asks.

Sayaka is relishing in the feeling of no more stomach pains, and her head rolls to the side as she looks at Madoka. "Three weeks...? Maybe?"

Madoka nods. She's embarrassed at her earlier actions, but she can see Homura doesn't think less of them. "There were... others, with us," she explains. "But they left."

"I see."

Madoka stretches her legs in front; it's strange to have food in her stomach again, and she looks down onto the floor. "We were running out of supplies. We... stayed behind, because Sayaka-chan's foot is injured."

She can hear guilt in her voice, and Sayaka only serves to reinforce that idea when she reaches over to drop her arm around Madoka's shoulder.

"I already told you, that it's not your fault."

Madoka looks up. "But—"

"Nope!" Sayaka is grinning. "What kind of best friend would I be, if I blamed you for something like that? Let it go, Madoka. I'd repeat the same thing, if I had to. No way was I going to abandon you."

Homura stiffens; her words hit a bit close to home.

Madoka nods timidly, before she turns to Homura who is no longer looking at them. "I was... searching for food when you found me. They... They left us a little bit, but we already ran out a few days ago."

Sayaka leans forward. "Which direction did you come from, anyways? The others, they were headed South. Maybe you ran into them?"

She blinks.

"I hope they made it," Madoka murmurs, her eyes casting up to the mid morning sky. "Everyone was really nice." A pause. "Well, almost everyone..."

She remains quiet.

She had come from the South, and she hadn't run into any survivors at all.

What she had run into, was a congregation of scavengers, distracted with a large feast that had enabled her to sneak by.

"Homura-chan?"

She turns to Madoka.

"Uhm." Another nervous smile. "W-What are you going to do now...? T-That is... uhm..."

She looks over to Sayaka. "Your leg. What's wrong with it?"

"Ahh..." Sayaka reaches over and lifts the cuffs of her pants, exposing an ankle that is swollen and purple.

She crawls over to examine it closer. "Is anything broken?"

Her fingers press down on discoloured flesh. Sayaka winces, but she shakes her head.

"No. I mean, I can still walk, and run and stuff. But, not for very long."

Without asking, she starts untying her laces. "You're only aggravating it by wearing shoes."

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Sorry," Homura mumbles softly. "How long ago did you hurt yourself?" she asks, hands more gentle as she removes Sayaka's shoe.

"Uh..." Sayaka winces again. She glances to Madoka. "Do you remember, Madoka?"

"Uhm..." Madoka watches as Homura carefully slips off Sayaka's sock. "Everyone left, maybe, a week ago...? So... So maybe a bit more than a week?"

"You should be resting it," Homura chides as she examines the extent of the injury. "Walking on a sprained ankle without proper support is just asking for it not to heal."

Sayaka scowls. "I-I know that, alright!"

"Is there a water source around here?"

Madoka nods. "There's a river, past the junkyard. But, uhm... i-it's kind of overrun..."

Homura gently lowers Sayaka's foot to the floor. "...How did you survive this long? Without water?"

"Uhm... w-we were lucky. Most of the city is intact, including two general stores fairly close by. It was stocked with plenty of bottled water and food."

That explained a lot.

"Has this place always had so many scavengers?"

Sayaka shakes her head. "Nah. I think they started appearing, maybe a bit before everyone was planning to leave? It was like they knew we were running out of food, and they wanted to attack us while we're at our weakest." She shivers.

She keeps her thoughts to herself. For so many to be remaining in this area, they *were* most likely waiting for these two to die.

She glances over to Madoka, who immediately notices when those lavender eyes turn to her.

"...I'll be truthful with you two. If you stay here any longer, you will most likely die."

Madoka gulps as Sayaka shifts in her seat.

"...Kaname-san. I owe your mother my life, and—"

Madoka holds out her hand. "Homura-chan. First off, I'm 'Madoka', not 'Kaname-san'. Repeat after me. Ma-do-ka."

She blinks. "Uhm—"

"Madoka."

"...M-Madoka-san."

Madoka frowns, but she lets that slide. "Secondly..." She exhales. "...Y-You don't owe Mama anything. Mama... Mama saved you, because it was the right thing to do. You have no obligations towards her, or to me." A sad smile.

She averts her eyes as she feels something sticking to her throat. It takes a few attempts, until she finally manages to recover.

"My destination is North," she tells them.

"Wait!" Sayaka quickly interrupts. "N-North? That's... most of those things are coming from that direction. It's-It's where the earthquakes began!"

She is entirely aware of this. "...It doesn't matter where you go. The world we know is no longer."

They both glance down.

"There's really only two reasons that people are still holding on," she explains, voice quiet. "One, they don't want to die. Two..." She looks away. "They're searching for someone. Their reason to stay alive."

"...Homura-chan. A-Are... Are you searching for someone, too?"

She doesn't reply. Her hands reach for her side bag, and Madoka tenses as she remembers what had happened the first time she had seen Homura do that.

A stack of papers are pulled out, bundled together with frayed strings.

"...What's that?" Sayaka asks, leaning forward, careful of her ankle.

Homura gently brushes the papers with her hands. "...I thought I was doing them favours, by accepting their last words. But," she turns to Madoka, who can see the pain within those eyes. "...I'm sorry. Y-You're the first person I managed to deliver words to. I—never thought how the recipient would feel, especially with how little hope there is to hold onto. I should've—held onto it, instead of telling you."

It takes a moment until Madoka finally understands what she's saying.

And her eyes are angry when she suddenly grabs Homura's wrist, forcing her to look up.

"T-There's a part of me," Madoka says, staring straight at Homura, "t-that wishes you had never told me. That... that wants to believe that you're lying, and that Mama is out there, searching for me." Homura tries to look away but Madoka moves forward, this time grabbing her by the shoulders. "But..." trembling fingers press down, and though there's layers of clothes in between, she can easily feel Homura's bones. She pauses, and takes a good, long look at this girl in front of her.

Glasses that are slightly crooked, cracked, and looking as broken as that face it sits atop of.

Clothes that sag, and are deliberately tied to offset how large they are as they cover her thin body.

A tired deposition; a girl who looks like she's just barely holding on.

"But..." Madoka continues softly, "...a part of me is also glad. What ifs... so many what ifs," she whispers. "What if Mama is out there, searching for me, and we end up missing each other by a hair's breadth? What if... what if Mama is out there, getting hurt, because she's looking for me? What if..." her lips tremble, "what if, Mama isn't looking for me at all...?"

Tears trail down, and Homura has the urge to reach out to wipe them away once more.

"Papa... is still out there, maybe," Madoka says softly. "Takkun..." Her eyes close. She leans forward, surprising Homura as she places her arms around her shoulders, before she presses in close, the full

weight of her body against hers. "Homura-chan... not knowing, is worse than knowing."

She remains quiet, and it takes a moment, until her arms reach out to slip around Madoka's small waist.

Sayaka closes her eyes, leaning back against the wall of the ledge. "...Maybe you should leave without me, Madoka."

Madoka jerks away from Homura, twisting so that she faces Sayaka. "W-What? W-What are you talking about, Sayaka-chan!"

Sayaka opens her eyes, only to gesture at her leg, a sad smile across her lips. "I'm only going to drag you two down. If it wasn't for me, you would've been with the others."

Madoka is on her feet in seconds. "I-If it wasn't for you, I would be the one in your position, Sayaka-chan! Or—Or worse!"

They're arguing now, but Homura ignores them, her own eyes closing.

It's strange.

She wandered to ease her guilt, but she never thought that it would be possible.

She opens her eyes, head now tilted to the orange sky.

"..We'll leave in a few days," she says quietly.

Madoka and Sayaka pause in their argument.

Madoka blinks. "W-What?"

Homura points to Sayaka's leg. "We'll make a brace for that, and try and get the swelling down. A walking stick will help you move faster, and it can double as a weapon."

Sayaka stares at her. "What?"

Homura nods. "You... don't have to come with me, but there's nothing in the South. Whoever you're looking for, is no longer there. There's

more scavengers North, meaning that there are more people there. You have until the day I leave to decide."

Madoka glances to Sayaka, who turns her attention to her leg.

"I..."

Homura slowly climbs to her feet. "You two know this area quite well, I assume?"

Madoka looks up. "Y-Yes, more or less."

"I'll need you to draw me out a map. We'll need to stock up on water before we leave." She glances over. "...Do either of you know how to use a gun?"

They shake their heads.

"...I'll teach you. Luckily, there's plenty of targets around."

Madoka gulps nervously, while Sayaka is torn between feeling fear, and a bit of excitemen**t.**

AN: Pewpewwwww. Yes, this will be continued one day as well.